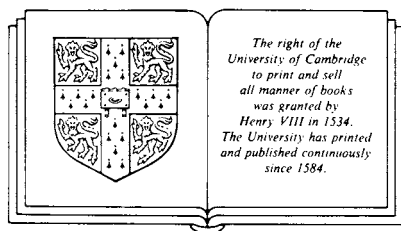


THE BLIND DEVOTION OF THE PEOPLE

Popular religion and the English Reformation

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Introduction

In the sixteenth century, the religion of the mass of the English people was subjected by their governments to a series of unprecedented and increasingly destructive assaults.

In the 1520s official attitudes towards the activities and institutions of traditional Catholicism were still essentially supportive. The seven sacraments and a wide range of additional ceremonies, as well as prayers and masses on behalf of the dead, the invocation of saints, and the veneration of images and relics, all continued to enjoy official approbation. So, in most respects, did the papacy, the secular clergy, the monastic orders, the parish churches and the religious guilds. In 1521 Henry VIII indeed received from the pope the title of Defender of the Faith.

From 1529, however, a complex of financial, political and personal factors combined with the influence of Cromwell and Cranmer to substantially modify this official support. An increasingly hostile attitude to the papacy, which in 1532–3 produced Acts against its revenue and jurisdiction, culminated in the Act declaring royal supremacy over the national Church in 1534. This was followed in 1536–9 by the governmental suppression of all monastic houses. Meanwhile the privileges of the secular clergy were eroded, particularly by the limitation of probate and mortuary fees in 1529, and its status as the prime provider of religious knowledge was implicitly undermined by the legitimization of the English Bible in 1538. Important practices were also attacked. The founding of chantries was restricted in 1529, and the confiscation of their property threatened by a statute of 1545. Saints' days were reduced in 1536. The royal injunctions of 1536 and 1538 prohibited pilgrimage, relic veneration, and offering to images. Despite the theologically conservative Six Articles of 1539, and the intermittent persecution of Lollards and Protestants, the reign of Henry VIII thus witnessed an unmistakable change in governmental attitudes towards vital components of the traditional religion.

Between 1547 and 1553 – under the boy king Edward VI, councillors like Somerset and Northumberland, and Archbishop Cranmer – official anta-

gonism was increasingly explicit. It was again impelled by economics and politics as much as by theology. The clergy were further reduced in number, particularly by the chantry dissolutions, and in status, especially by the legalization of clerical marriage, the new ordinal and the new services. The wealth of parish churches was attacked, plate, vestments and other treasures suffering official confiscation. The local religious guilds were suppressed. Traditional practices were prohibited by the royal injunctions of 1547 and by subsequent legislation; they included the display of roods and other images, prayers and masses on behalf of the dead, Easter vigils, and the use of holy bread, holy water, palms and ashes. The Latin mass was ousted by the English Prayerbook of 1549, and altars were banned in 1550. The Prayerbook of 1552 was even more overtly anti-Catholic.

Between 1553 and 1558 the reign of Mary Tudor brought a temporary reversal of governmental policies. Papal authority was restored, monasteries legitimized, and married clerics deprived. The confiscation of church goods ceased, and religious guilds were again permitted. Amongst the activities now legal or obligatory were the Catholic sacraments, intercessions, saint invocation, relic veneration and image veneration, and the use of objects like holy bread and water. In 1555 the heresy laws were revived, and an extensive persecution of Protestants commenced.

Official hostility was renewed by the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558. Another wave of decrees, including in 1559 more royal injunctions and the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, again banished papal authority, monasteries and religious guilds, initiated a further confiscation of church goods, and prohibited Catholic sacraments and ceremonies as well as intercessions, relics, images and roods. Henceforth Catholicism was the consistent target of governmental disapproval, which would only be intensified by the papal excommunication of the queen in 1570. Within a generation, official attitudes towards the traditional religion had thus been transformed: support had been replaced by enmity.¹

Changes in government policy are not difficult to chart; it is their impact upon the average man that remains so controversial and obscure. Precisely how did he respond to the assaults launched against the traditional activities and institutions? Did he acquiesce, or did he resist? By what internal motivations were his responses impelled? And by what types of external influence were these shaped? Such problems are patently crucial to an understanding of the English Reformation, yet the solutions proffered by historians have been far from wholly satisfactory. Even the recent and valuable series of local Reformation studies have to a large extent concentrated upon the

¹ For surveys as regards changing official attitudes, see, for example, Dickens 1967A; and Hughes 1950–4.

clergy and the gentry, the two best-documented social groups; the mass of the population has suffered relative neglect.²

For this reason the present study will focus primarily upon the laity below the level of the gentry. It will commence on the eve of the Reformation, traverse the Henrician, Edwardian, Marian and Elizabethan upheavals, and end with the papal excommunication of 1570. And it will concentrate its attention upon a specific region: the south-western peninsula, which in the sixteenth century consisted of two counties (Devon and Cornwall) and constituted one diocese (Exeter). Several factors make this a particularly suitable region for investigation. Firstly, it contained a substantial portion – probably more than 5% – of Tudor England's total population. Secondly, it has almost invariably been depicted as a classic example of the alleged relationship between remoteness from London and resistance to religious change. This interpretation has usually been supported by reference to the 'Prayerbook rebellion' of 1549. Thirdly, its experience of the Reformation has not until now been comprehensively researched. Selected aspects of the topic have been studied by scholars like W. T. MacCaffrey, A. L. Rowse and J. A. Youings,³ but no full-scale analysis has yet been essayed. The fourth factor is the most important. The South-West offers the historian a comparative wealth of primary evidence from which to reconstruct the impact of the Reformation at an authentically popular level.

Among the potential sources of evidence most frequently underutilized in conventional histories are the extant art and architecture of parish churches. For example, the importance of intercessory masses for individuals or guilds on the eve of the Reformation is clearly attested by the number of chapels still visible within the region's churches. Pier-niches demonstrate the popularity of image-cults. The proliferation of pulpits and benches suggests an increasing emphasis upon the sermon. Sculptures, wood-carvings, screen-paintings, wall-paintings and stained glass provide insights into devotional idioms before the Reformation; they may also betray the iconoclastic impact of the Reformation itself.⁴

Nevertheless it is upon the documentary sources that historians must primarily rely. Of these a number may be categorized as unofficial. Pre-Reforma-

² See below, pp. 262–8.

³ MacCaffrey 1958; Rowse 1941; Youings 1979. See also Cornwall 1977; Rose-Troup 1913; Whiting 1982; and Whiting 1983.

⁴ References to art and architecture are based largely upon an extensively personal examination of south-western churches. The pre-eminent authorities are Pevsner 1952A; 1952B; and Pevsner and Radcliffe 1970. Also valuable are Anderson 1955; Bond 1908; 1910; Bond and Camm 1909; Caiger-Smith 1963; Cave 1948; Cook 1954; Cox 1915; 1916; Cox and Ford 1943–4; Crabbe 1854; Dunkin 1882; Ellacombe 1872; Henderson 1923–4; 1925; Hoskins 1954; Nelson 1913; Rogers 1877; Rushforth 1927A; 1927B; Slader 1968; Smith 1969; and Stabb 1909–16.

tion examples include a Cornish miracle play, written in 1504, and an early-Tudor legend concerning one of Cornwall's celebrated relics. Among works from the Reformation period itself are John Leland's record of his travels through Devon and Cornwall between 1535 and 1543, with its information on local cults; three tracts on contemporary religious issues by Philip Nichols, a Devonian who probably lived at Totnes, between 1547 and 1549; the predominantly religious 'articles' devised by the leaders of the south-western rebellion in 1549; and the epistle of a minister, William Ramsey, to his former congregation at South Molton in 1562. Later works include Nicholas Roscarrock's 'Lives of the Saints', with its emphasis on the cults of his native Cornwall; the *Survey of Cornwall* compiled by another Cornishman, Richard Carew; the *Acts and Monuments* of John Foxe, who records the region's two Protestant martyrdoms; and, of pre-eminent importance, the writings of Exeter's John Hooker. Events in Tudor Exeter are chronicled by Hooker in his *Commonplace Book*, while his 'Description of the City of Exeter' contains the fullest early narrative of the south-western rebellion. Also useful are his 'Synopsis Chorographical' of Devon and his 'Life' of the Devonian Sir Peter Carew.⁵ Although writing mainly in Elizabeth's reign, Roscarrock, Carew, Foxe and Hooker drew upon earlier records and upon consultation with witnesses. Roscarrock gathered information on the ancient cults from local men and women, who still spoke 'by tradition of their predecessors'. Foxe's accounts of the local martyrs were based upon the testimony of a minister at Exeter in 1531 and of eyewitnesses in the same city in 1558. Hooker's description of the preaching of Hugh Latimer at Exeter in 1534 must have been based upon the memories of his own father, who had attended it. Personal recollections were also included. Hooker, when about 24, had seen the revolt of 1549 from within Exeter itself, and Roscarrock remembered, from his childhood, the Marian reaction.⁶

The value of these unofficial sources is further enhanced by the diversity of their religious orientations. The author of the Cornish miracle play, the composers of the rebel articles and Nicholas Roscarrock were all committed

⁵ For Nichols' authorship of 'An Answer to the Articles' (Royal 18 B XI), see Scheurweghs 1933–4. For his Totnes connection, note (a) his presence at sermons in the neighbouring parishes of Marldon and Harberton (*Copy of a Letter*, pp. 10, 32); and (b) the early existence of a Protestant group at Totnes (see below, pp. 152, 155–6, 165). For Roscarrock, see Rowse 1955. For Foxe, see Mozley 1940, esp. pp. 118–203.

⁶ For records, see, for example, 'Lives of Saints', fols. 131, 296v, 393v. For witnesses, see *Survey of Cornwall*, p. 289; 'Lives of Saints', fols. 109v, 114v, 202v, 262, 296v, 312v, 323v; *Acts and Monuments*, II, pp. 1038, 2050–1; and Hooker, *Commonplace Book*, fol. 342. Foxe's 'minister' may have been William Kethe, who was (a) a preacher; (b) a 'native of Exeter'; (c) a Marian exile; and possibly (d) a sojourner with Foxe at Basle in Mary's reign (Garrett 1966, pp. 204–5). For recollections, see 'Description of Exeter', pp. 25–6; and 'Lives of Saints', fols. 312v, 360v.

to traditional Catholicism. Nichols, Ramsey, Carew, Foxe and Hooker, by contrast, were all resolutely hostile.

Sources of this type are supplemented by an even wider range of official records. Those compiled for the various organs of central government include state papers, proceedings of the Privy Council, bills of complaint from the Courts of Chancery and Star Chamber, and chantry certificates and church inventories for the use of the exchequer. Those compiled for institutions at the regional level include registers, act-books, deposition-books and wills for the Bishop of Exeter and his officials as well as the records of the dean and chapter. Of those produced for urban or parochial bodies, the most valuable are financial accounts; these were the work of appointed receivers or of elected churchwardens. Each type of record possesses both merits and limitations as a historical source. Legal depositions, for example, are often one-sided and prone to exaggeration. Two types, nevertheless, can provide particularly significant insights into the development of popular religion: the warden's account and the will.

Churchwardens' accounts appear to survive in greater number for the South-West than for most other regions of mid-Tudor England. Though varying considerably in completeness, significant sequences exist for the Exeter churches of Holy Trinity, St John's Bow, St Mary Steps and St Petrock; for the towns of Ashburton, Camborne, Chagford, Chudleigh, Crediton, Dartmouth, Modbury, North Molton, St Thomas-by-Launceston, Stratton and Tavistock; and for the more rural communities of Antony, Braunton, Broadhempston, Coldridge, Dartington, Iddesleigh, Kilmington, Molland, Morebath, North Petherwin, St Breock, South Tawton, Winkleigh, Woodbury and Woodland. The accounts thus detail the annual revenue and expenditure of parish churches in a variety of settlement types and in widely separated localities. They reveal, for example, the extent to which images were venerated before the Reformation, Bibles purchased in the reign of Henry VIII, altars removed in the time of Edward VI, and masses restored under Mary and suppressed under Elizabeth. The essential veracity of such accounts was ensured by their annual recitation before an assembly of parishioners, as occurred at Throwleigh in 1556. Since wardens were usually elected by the parishioners, their religious policies must generally have reflected the prevailing local attitudes. At St Gennys in 1558, the unpopularity of one warden's attitude to the restored Catholic rites in fact resulted in his dismissal from office by the Eight Men.⁷

Similarly revealing are the wills. Some, including those of Thomas Bond at Exeter in 1501 and of John Bougin at Totnes in 1548, were written

⁷ CCB 855, fols. 43v, 409.

by the testator himself;⁸ most were probably dictated to a clerical amanuensis.⁹ Despite the wartime destruction of the diocese's probate records, abstracts and transcripts remain: some 221 relevant examples have been analysed in the preparation of this study. So have some 177 wills which, having been proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, survive intact. Of the 398 testators thus represented, all composed their wills between 1520 and 1569. All were lay people from below the level of the gentry, and all owned property of some sort in the South-West, where all but a handful were evidently resident. The sample includes women – usually widows – as well as men, and inhabitants of towns as well as of rural communities. It consists of 30 wills from 1520 to 1529, 41 from 1530 to 1539, 146 from 1540 to 1549, 91 from 1550 to 1559 and 90 from 1560 to 1569.

Such numbers, while representing only a small percentage of the regional population, nevertheless permit a broad evaluation of religious trends. The opening formula of a will may reflect the testator's attitude to the saints; even if written by an amanuensis it can rarely have diverged drastically from the views of his client. In 1557, for example, Richard Friend of Ermington bequeathed his soul to God, Our Lady and the saints; he then confirmed the conservative nature of his faith by making bequests to intercessions and to images of saints. Formulae, nevertheless, may mislead: in 1528 Joan Tackle of Honiton made bequests to figures of the saints, but in her formula failed to invoke them.¹⁰ More consistently valuable to the historian are the bequests themselves. These can indicate the changing levels of popular investment in intercessory prayers and masses, in images and shrines, in monasteries, friaries, guilds and parish churches, and in various associated components of religious life.

The present study commences with a broad survey of the Tudor South-West, outlining the geographical, economic, social, political and ecclesiastical contexts within which the Reformation occurred. Part One then attempts to assess the nature of popular responses to this revolution. It examines the reactions of men and women to the official attacks directed against the activities and institutions of traditional Catholicism. The aim of Part Two is to explain these reactions by evaluating the causal factors behind them. It investigates firstly the internal motivations by which they were impelled, and secondly the various forms of external influence by which they were shaped.

⁸ PROB 11 13, fol. 198v; Murray, 3, John Bougin, 1548.

⁹ In most cases this was probably the testator's parish priest. For example, one witness to the will made by Robert Potter of Christow in 1539 was his vicar (PROB 11 26, fol. 106).

¹⁰ CCB 855A, fol. 311v; PROB 11 23, fol. 71.